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How to Put Employee Empowerment Into Practice

By Max Messmer

It's difficult to read a business publication these days without coming across at least one article on employee empowerment. So we recently conducted research to determine the extent to which the concept is actually being practiced within American business.

We found that, while a good deal of progress has been made, there is still a significant gap between the *perception* of empowerment as viewed by management and the *reality* as viewed by employees.

We conducted an independent survey of managers of 200 of the Fortune 1000 companies to see if they believed they were giving employees more authority to make decisions and take action than they were five years ago. A resounding 88% said that they believed they were.

Simultaneously, we conducted independent research among a nationally projectable sample of *employees* to ask if they believed management was giving them more authority to make decisions and take action than they did five years ago. Only 64% said that they were.

As long as that gap exists, companies are allowing vast amounts of energy and talent to slip through their fingers.

Why Empower Your Employees?

Employee empowerment can result in quantifiable, bottom-line results. It can greatly increase individual productivity, which is often a necessity as departments are asked to accomplish more work with fewer people.

Corporate belt-tightening is not likely to go away in the near future, and the accounting function might bear a disproportionate amount of the load. In another recent survey, we asked managers what department is most likely to add staff during the next 12 months, and only five percent of them mentioned accounting.

Even when there *is* an opportunity to hire new people, the competition for skilled accounting professionals is fierce due to a skilled labor shortage that is projected to worsen. Those companies who can offer candidates the opportunity to make decisions and turn their ideas into actions will be the ones that attract the best and brightest people.

Assess Your Own Empowerment Quotient

There are many reasons why empowerment is more easily said than done, which contributes to the large gap between perception and reality. Managers may truly believe that they are giving their people more authority when in fact, they are not altering their own behavior to

deliver on the promise.

That's because managers have been ingrained with principles like: "It's up to you to catch mistakes before they happen"; "The boss is supposed to have all the answers ... that's why he's the boss"; "The buck stops at the top."

These principles were all honored in the old school of rigid hierarchical management. But they are inappropriate for today's flatter organizations, where many layers have been stripped away and replaced, theoretically, by a more empowered workforce.

The first important step in closing the gap between perception and reality is to determine if, indeed, *the rules have changed in your organization*. If the answer is that they really haven't, then managers must commit to making this change. Because management buy-in is essential to creating the kind of environmental freedom needed to encourage people to develop as individuals.

Putting Empowerment Into Practice

The foundation of empowerment is based on prudent risk-taking. You, yourself, must be empowered by your management to take the risks that are inherent in giving greater authority to your people. Explain your goals and action plan to your own boss to gain his or her understanding and agreement. This will give you greater confidence, provide you with guidance on mutually acceptable areas and levels of risk, and avoid unpleasant surprises down the road.

Then, call a meeting of your people and explain your intentions. Give them the same kind of guidelines for risk-taking that you've established with your boss. Help them understand just how much rope you are willing to give them.

At the beginning, you may ask them to discuss their decisions and actions with you before moving ahead with them, so that you can provide any input that is likely to increase their success. The key is to help them *enrich* their own ideas so that they can become more facile in independent thinking and action.

The key to putting empowerment into practice is in taking very great care on your own part to always practice exactly what you preach. Once you've modified your own behavior and learned how to engage in risk-taking, you will discover an exciting new dimension of "people power" unleashed all around you.